

Employees overworked? 7 tactics to lessen the stress

by Cali Williams Yost

The employees I talk to say they feel overworked. The business leaders I work with say increased workloads are here to stay.

Overwork might feel like a problem for employees. But for organizations, it's not a pain point.

After all, those overloaded employees are still meeting or exceeding performance goals. And in this economy, they're unlikely to jump ship. What's the problem?

Who drives work/life balance?

Actually, many company leaders do recognize that overwork might not be sustainable for the long term. They're the ones looking at work/life flexibility to help employees manage their workloads, their time and their personal commitments without burning out.

The surprise: Employees are resisting it. A new study by The Flex+Strategy Group/Work+Life Fit reveals that employees don't necessarily see work/life flexibility as a solution to their overwork problems, even though they recognize that they're neglecting other parts of their lives because of their workloads. Instead, they assume that flexibility will give them less time to do their work.

That means it's up to HR to position flexibility as a potential solution to the problems overworked employees face.

7 tactics for HR to try

Here are seven ways HR can address overwork stress:

1. Be honest with employees about the situation. Explain that in the near term, the workload will remain as is. But then urge employees to address that reality to find work-arounds so they won't ignore their families, homes, friends and other interests outside of work.

2. Allow employees to flex their work hours. *Example:* An organization was getting complaints from clients that they couldn't reach customer service reps outside usual working hours. Naturally, reps objected to working longer hours. So the business asked for volunteers to start and finish their workday two hours earlier and for others to begin and end two hours later.

Result: With plenty of takers, it was able to add four hours to each workday without lengthening anyone's shift.

3. Occasionally encourage working at home. Employees might get more work done, even if they don't put in their eight hours during the normal workday.

4. Give up the notion of work/life balance. Instead, look for a work/life fit. Which schedule and workplace will work best for each employee and each kind of work? It might look different for each person.

5. Let employees figure out their own schedules. At one company, team members each posted their personal schedules on a group calendar. The co-workers arranged their work hours so every job was covered—and every employee found time to honor personal commitments.

The fact is, when businesses encourage employees to embrace work/life flexibility as a solution to time pressure, employees often take a fresh look at how they're using their time—and wind up using it better.

6. Encourage experimentation. Let managers try out unique schedules and arrangements on an employee-by-employee basis without jumping through lots of approval hoops.

Example: A company had to send a large team off site to work on a client project. Some employees balked at being away from home for two weeks. So the manager sent half of the group the first week, while the other half supported their colleagues via phone and computer from the office. The next week, the two halves switched places.

Result: The employees spent less time away from home—and the client felt like it was getting double the help in the form of two separate teams.

7. Implement temporary flexibility during peak work periods. *Example:* An accounting firm with a pre-April 15 busy season let accountants come in late on mornings after working especially late.

Result: All-stars could keep working without interruption if they were on a roll without worrying about low productivity and fatigue the next day.

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